

## **A-modern-midrash-on-Psalm-27**

### Abstract

A traditional Jewish view of Psalm 27 is set out and then the poem is re-interpreted as the journey of a refugee from his homeland to the United Kingdom (UK).

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Rabbinic tradition connects the special significance of *Elul* (and the first ten days of *Tishri*) with the 40 days of Moses' stay on Mount Sinai. It is during this time that everyone must ask himself (or herself)<sup>1</sup> the question: 'Have my good deeds and acts of charity outbalanced my sins?'

In spiritual preparation for the High Holydays, we pray for God to act as our "light and salvation"; recognition that one has sinned is how this Psalm begins. The wicked are people who stumble around in the dark but Torah illuminates the way for the righteous. By analogy, in the actual world, a bright light enables, for example, dog-mess on the pavement to be avoided. In His light, we can see ourselves as God can see us all the time. There is no hiding from the Eternal in the dark.<sup>2</sup>

Our thoughts could well be negative at what is a low point in the annual Jewish cycle.<sup>3</sup> The evil people in verse 2 could be interpreted as the heavenly beings who accuse Israel, during the Days of Awe. More probably, we should be referring to ourselves, as from time to time, we are malevolent; what the Rabbis have called the evil inclination.

The message of hope, whilst we analyse and act on our failures, continues into verse 3, which clearly presents a martial picture. The superscription is usually interpreted as David's and it possibly refers to various events in his life. Having witnessed God's help in defeating the Philistines, David knows that he need not fear his enemies, not even a whole army. Before the conflict starts, the soldiers will naturally be concerned or worse. We are told that it is the heart that is not fearful: an emotional rather than a reasoned response.

Together, the first three verses, with a pattern where the second half-verse exemplifies the first half, all build up to the threat of actual war. The seven words in each half of verse 3 emphasise the climax. Yet how is this threat met? It is ignored.

Verse 4 is a lovely one and repeats the well-known sentiments of verse 6 of Psalm 23. The imagery shifts to the Temple; the issues set out in verses 1 – 3 have become irrelevant; the response is to ignore them and to trust in the Eternal.

Many commentators interpret David's request as asking to gain the wisdom of God and to experience the sweetness of his ways.<sup>4</sup> The translator has offered a spiritual interpretation; physical attractiveness is not what is being sought.

The Psalmist has declared, in earlier verses, his confidence in the Eternal. But now, he expresses his desire – the one thing he wants most – to live in the Jerusalem Temple. For the rest of us, to enjoy God's presence is the reward for having walked in the ways of Torah;<sup>5</sup> so I read the plea as metaphorical. We can perpetually be engaged with God only in the real world and, even in Biblical times, all Israel could not – and did not – live in the Temple.

The first colon of verse 5 refers to improvised constructions but the implication, reinforced by the reference to rock in the second half of the verse, is of much more solid and definitive edifices. We might see a foretaste of *Sukkot* (temporary shelters) here.

David and all battlefield commanders are exposed in the presence of foes. We will hear this call when the Shofar is blown every day in Elul.<sup>6</sup> Replace enemies in verse 6 with those who we have wronged and this verse models an essential step in *teshuvah*.

Having discussed God and considered our relationship with Him, in the first stanza above, we now talk to God. Before we can seek atonement for our sins, we must recognise where we have gone wrong and take responsibility for such actions or inactions.

The phraseology at the start of verse 7 mirrors the opening of the Shema. We notice a distinct change of tone and of person: the verses are now considering our calls to God. This verse emphasises that we are all in need of divine protection. Our personal circumstances, like that of David, are changing. The Psalmist has already declared his trust in God and his certainty that God will hide and protect him. Why does he now need to call out and request God to hear his voice? The answer will come by verse 12.

We are now at the most crucial point in this Psalm: verse 8. We have an imperative: "Seek My face!" Surely this cannot be a call to idolatry? Pre-monotheistic places of worship often had faces of their celestial being(s) as decorations or places where worshippers, standing or kneeling nearby, could petition their god. I take it that the call is for God's face to turn towards us as in the Priestly Blessings<sup>7</sup> and to be included amongst those He protects.<sup>8</sup>

Verse 9 is a sad one, with four negative requests of the Eternal. Do not hide Your face from me paraphrases the end of the previous verse and continues the lamentation. The reference must be allegorical, as even Moses was denied the privilege of seeing God's face. I interpret face throughout these verses as presence. Can anything be crueller than being excluded from His companionship? We have been warned<sup>9</sup> that if we turn away from YHVH, He will hide his face and thus

withhold His protection. The call to answer (verse 7) is not a literal one, but a hope for divine intervention (verse 8 and here) to guide us through difficult times.

*Elul* follows *Tisha B'Av*. Thinking back in Jewish history, the walls of Jerusalem had been broken and the Temple destroyed. We must ensure that our personal relationships are not similarly ruptured. It is a time of maximum danger in the Jewish year. Each of us is in jeopardy (but only God fully knows in what peril we are). To a young person, being abandoned by parents, through neglect or death, is about the worst situation that any child could imagine. We are told here that, even if our biological parents reject us, God will take over. It is unusual to imagine God as our parent, but His protective care is even more constant than that of our (earthly) parents.<sup>10</sup>

Some see verses 11 and 12 as recognition of the unworthiness of the speaker,<sup>11</sup> a view to which I cannot subscribe. In some ways, these later verses express a contradiction. Earlier in the Psalm, David was brimming with confidence, even in the face of his enemies. Now he seems much less sure. This discrepancy is a genuine reflection of our existence; human beings are inconsistent.

The Psalmist is requesting divine guidance to help him merit being rewarded with success against his inner adversaries and, arguably, external foes, just as we must recognise we need God's help to repent efficiently and change our future behaviour in a positive way. All people must seek the paths of integrity without the desire to protect our reputation through insincere repentance; we must not lie to others or to ourselves.

Our personal circumstances, like that of David, are evolving; we must internalise the need for change; we must really believe it would have been better if our evil side had not led us down iniquitous pathways. The person traversing the wrong path is not further away from God, but an individual with a distressed soul in challenging personal circumstances. Repentance requires the person to turn away from the pursuit of what s/he craves. But holiness is not achieved by will-power alone; actions are required and it is for help with this we are praying.

The request of verse 11 to discover God's path is followed by fully four synonyms for enemies, all bent on his destruction. The false witnesses could refer to David being a victim of a campaign of slander; the aim being to incite Saul against him.

The Psalmist expresses his conviction that he will continue in the land of the living – as opposed to dying and thus descending to Sheol. Seeing God's goodness is a general expression of trust, although Smith interprets it as the beauty, both sacred and aesthetic, enjoyed by pilgrims on visiting the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>12</sup>

God is long-suffering to both the righteous and the wicked,<sup>13</sup> and so will accept our sincere repentance. The English in the JPS Tanakh provides a positive note but some translations reflect a note of rejection: setting out the Psalmist's worry about what his condition might be if he had not believed. Genesis 50:15 adopts a similar

tone describing the concern Joseph's brothers felt about the possibility of their rejection (if Joseph had harboured a grudge) – after the death of Jacob.

The call to be strong and of good courage in verse 14 is similar to Moses' advice to Israel and Joshua in Deuteronomy 31:6-7. Confident in his salvation, the petitioner concludes with words of encouragement to the wider community and this is an apt summary.

I now wish to re-examine the composition from a different perspective and in a context very different to that of its composition. It can be read as a summary of the life and travels of an itinerant refugee on a journey from his homeland to the United Kingdom.

Too many individuals within contemporary society are intolerant of people who are different. From right wing politicians contemplating (metaphorically I hope) mounting barricades along the southern coast of England, or on the Mexican/American border, to repel immigrants, often characterised as social security scroungers, to children in a playground making fun of the obese or disabled, people tend to reject those who are atypical, those whose appearance, behaviour or way of life clashes with their pre-existing prejudices.

The first verse can be thought of as a prayer asking for the outside world to use God's light as a magnifying glass in judging the person; it expresses the hope that those he meets will look for this inner person and not be fooled by first impressions or external appearance. The person realises that his current situation is untenable. The questions are not rhetorical; the speaker realises he has a fight on his hands.

The next two verses explore the distress felt by the displaced person. Are we subconsciously assuming that others are being punished by God? The first verse had given us some reassurance but now, in this second verse, there is some detail on potential snags. Those who come to subjugate the writer are stated to be wicked; the enemies are depicted as carnivorous animals, or worse, actual cannibals. The picture is vivid if metaphorical.

Although the military allusions in the third verse are often applied to David, the refugee too does face an army of border guards, security staff and law enforcement officials.

On his journey now, the displaced person realises he is different; he needs protection in the face of indifference at best or outright hostility at worst. In the same way that individuals with disabilities sometimes withdraw into themselves, immigrants too are isolated. Possibly, the only place they can be truly be themselves is in God's presence.

So in verse 5, the individual is relying upon God to stand by him on his journey, to secure his hiding places, such as the back of heavy goods vehicles on railway trucks. Discovery will put an end to his trek and likely result in him being returned to his homeland perhaps in north or sub-Saharan Africa. The nouns used in

this verse, *sukkah* (lair, shelter) and *seter* (tent) are references to temporary structures, as nomads might know and as our refugee probably used on his journey.

The human being has no home of his own but needs to rely on charity, a government agency or perhaps circumstances to house him. So I read God's tent (or tabernacle) in verse 6 as a metaphor for a bed in a hostel, or a temporary shelter built out of discarded cardboard boxes or perhaps even a space stolen in the back of a container lorry. He is hoping that blind chance will give him somewhere vaguely suitable to rest his head for the night.

The prayer for help of a travelling migrant now follows. In the second stanza (verse 7ff), the individual expresses the realistic, if somewhat depressing, notion that mankind is against him. He realises the gravity of his situation; only God can save him and so he addresses his lament directly to Him.

God sees value in every human being and this is the theme of verses 8 and 9. The person is now at the most crucial point in his journey: Will he get through or be permanently rejected? The focus of too many people is on themselves. When they see someone who is different, do people worry that they too might be at risk? So the cries "Seek My face!" (Verse 8) and "Do not thrust your servant aside" (Verse 9) are pleas – almost vain hopes – for acceptance.

Verse 10 employs the metaphor of parenthood to represent the country from which our refugee has fled. In this interpretation, the victim, for whatever reason, like our nomadic ancestors, has left his homeland. He is praying that God will adopt him and guide him to a place of safety in contrast to the troubles (or lack of opportunities) in the country from which he has fled.

The Greeks (or, more properly, Hellenists) were obsessed with beauty. This can lead us into the false judgement that someone with a physical incapacity – almost by definition not beautiful – is unworthy. Yet all individuals, including the disabled, are created in the image of God.<sup>14</sup>

Addressed directly to *YHVH*, verses 11 and 12 are expressing the refugee's fears of rejection. By now, he has landed physically, even if illegally, and has unobtrusively slipped from his hiding place off a cross-channel train or out of the back of a lorry. Travelling a new and different path, he is asking for divine guidance to move through the part of his journey of maximum risk. Almost certainly hungry and thirsty, he cannot attend to his personal needs but must evade port staff, customs officers or the police. He knows their automatic bias will be to capture and then throw him out.

Perhaps by now with a foothold in the United Kingdom, in verse 13, he is still fearful that life could take a turn for the worse. After all, his recent history has taught him the harsh lesson that uncertainties dog him every step of the way. He may be shunned because of his appearance, chased out by a mob or perhaps a change in Government could lead to alternative policies to his disadvantage.

In verse 14, the focus changes and turns to us, those already secure in the United Kingdom, whether our ancestors arrived here hundreds of years ago or just after the Holocaust. Our God-given mission is to help him fit in to the new place to which he has travelled. It was in the Book of Numbers that we learnt that the Israelite people were first organised as an army. We, the Jewish people today, are an army but not a military one: a force for good in repairing our broken world and our efforts are needed in the Middle East and elsewhere. We must ensure that the earlier expressions of confidence, in verse 3 in particular, are translated into positive actions.

We live in anxious times. Even those of us with secure housing, employment and loving families still meet challenges. The situation is much worse for the homeless refugee modelled in the verses of this Psalm. Those of us in faith communities must work to provide a framework for welcoming the incomer and building up his trust.

## NOTES

1. The issues are the same for women as for men but I will use the masculine pronoun to designate individuals of either gender.
2. Rabbi Amy R Scheinerman; private (e-mail) communication.
3. I thank Dr Jeremy Schonfield, Reader in Jewish Liturgy at the Leo Baeck College, London, for introducing me to this idea.
4. R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) p. 92.
5. "But be very careful to fulfil the Instruction and the Teaching that Moses the servant of the LORD enjoined upon you, to love the LORD your God and to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments ..." (Josh.22:5)
6. Many Orthodox communities omit blowing the Shofar on Shabbat. Some Progressive communities continue the week day practice by blowing the Shofar on Shabbat, the Shofar being kept in the Ark before and throughout Shabbat, replicating the custom of the Jerusalem Temple of Biblical times.
7. Num.6:25.
8. This plea is exemplified in other Psalms. Ps.22:25 "For He did not scorn, He did not spurn the plea of the lowly; He did not hide His face from him; ..." and Ps.31:17 "Show favour to Your servant; as You are faithful, deliver me."
9. "He said: "I will hide My countenance from them, And see how they fare in the end. For they are a very treacherous breed, Children with no loyalty in them." (Deut.32:20)
10. "Can a woman forget her baby, Or disown the child of her womb? Though she might forget, I could never forget you." (Isa.49:15)

11. Peter Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 1 – 50* (Waco: Word Books, 1983) p. 233.
12. M. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims", *Union Seminary Review*, 46 (1992) pp. 156-166.
13. Ex.34:7; Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 111a.
14. The ideas in this paragraph were inspired by David W Anderson, Beauty and disability, *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, Vol. 19 number 3 (2015). However, his suggestion that the Hebrew word *tob* can relate to the concept of beauty is wholly wrong from my perspective and exposes a fundamental difference between Christian (Hellenistic) and Jewish theology. God's pronouncement that something is "good" has nothing to do with aesthetics but means that it has met God's Divine design.